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“The Mission of the Jew”

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SERMON

delivered at the

NEW WEST END SYNAGOGUE,

on the

FESTIVAL OF PENTECOST, 5677-1917,

by

Rev. EPHRAIM LEVINE, M.A.

London :
GEO. YOUNG,
9, Harp Lane, E.C.3.

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rivers would run dry, and the countries dependent on these rivers would go to waste, if the fountain-heads of these streams became closed up and so, notwithstanding what may be said to the contrary, Jewry will disappear and its mission will cease, if somewhere there is not a centre or central reservoir from which it can be ever and ever fed anew.

Feeling in this respect as I do, and having come to the conclusion that a remedy for existing conditions may possibly be found in the repopulation of Palestine by the Jewish people, I continue at the same time of the opinion that no effort should be made to re-establish a Jewish nation, because I believe were this done, the very purpose which is in my mind would become destroyed. I believe I am not far wrong if I say that from 50 per cent. to 75 per cent. of the so-called Jewish Nationalists are either atheists or agnostics, and that the great majority of the Jewish Nationalist leaders have absolutely no interest in the Jewish religion. Conditions in this respect are already now—before a Jewish nation has actually been established, as is the desire of these Jewish Nationalists—the same as those which existed when the Jewish state was an actuality and when priest and prophet were ever in disagreement and feud with kingdom and state, and which led in the end to the state's destruction. This would surely happen again were a Jewish state again established.

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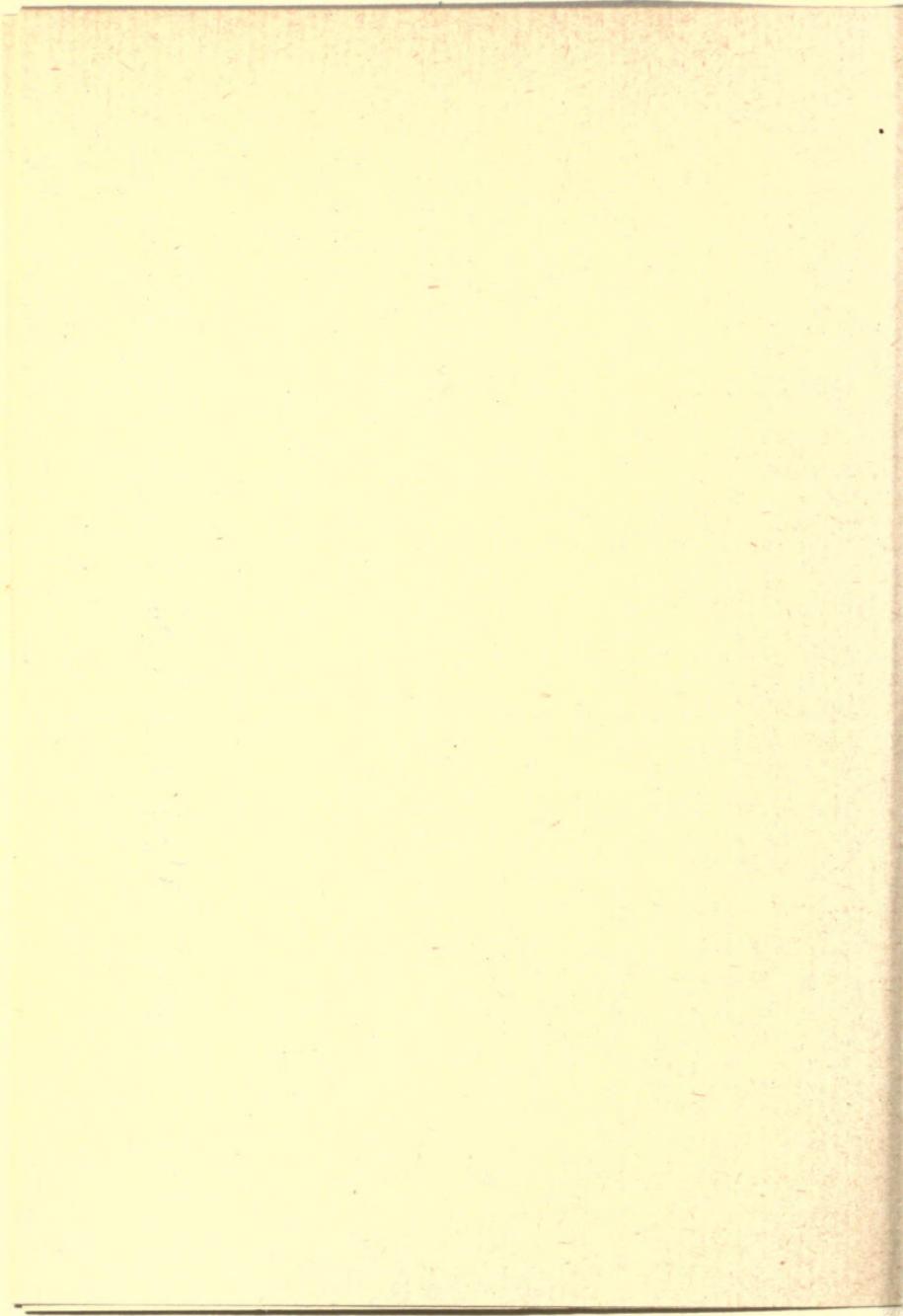
ZIONISM v. NATIONALISM.

Mr. Jacob H. Schiff, the leading Jew of America, writes on May 11, 1917:

The breaking down of the Ghetto walls in Russia and the dispersing of, and the radical change in, the social status of one-half of our entire race, cannot but have a far-reaching effect upon the Jewish problem everywhere. One thing appears certain, that the feeding, from the late Russian Pale, of Jewry outside of Russia, and especially of Jewry in our own country, both in numbers and in the product of the great Jewish mind, is sure to become greatly reduced, if it is not going to cease entirely.

The danger is great that this may, in coming generations, lead to disintegration, and I have asked myself what can be done to counteract this. Now, we cannot, and must not, close our eyes to the fact that Palestine has a peculiar attraction for the Jews; more so now even than in bygone ages. This, I feel, in the face of what has taken place in Russia, should be taken advantage of to establish in Palestine, not a Jewish nation, but the seed for a large, if not almost exclusive Jewish

compilation among which, Jewish religious life, Jewish thought and Jewish



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Annex
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113



“The Mission of the Jew”

There are one or two alterations which I have made in preparing this Sermon for publication, but on the whole it is a faithful record. It is printed in deference to the wishes of many who were in Synagogue on the Festival of Pentecost.



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“The Mission of the Jew”

*“Thy people shall be my people, thy God
shall be my God.” (Ruth)*

The Book of Ruth, which we are bidden to read on this Festival of Pentecost, will never lose its fascination. So long as heart responds to heart in this world, so long will that simple telling story of the heroism of Ruth and her loyalty to Naomi, continue to make its appeal to men and women. We see here constancy and devotion, belief in an ideal and fidelity to that ideal. These three women must have presented a pathetic picture as they stood alone on that country road, their ways about to part for ever, Naomi, a forlorn widow, a lonely figure bereft of her sons and going forth at her time of life to begin the world anew; her two daughters-in-law, still young women with the world before them preparing for the moment of parting. “Orpah kissed her mother-in-law but Ruth clave to her.” There are times in the lives of all of us when the hour is charged with a solemnity which is rich in opportunity. When a word, or a look, or a thought, can determine the

future of our hopes. Such a moment was this for Ruth. She had come to the turning point of her life—how should she make her choice? Behind her in the sweet light of reminiscence is Moab, the home of her childhood, the scene of her friendships, the centre of her interests. Before her lies Israel with its dark forbidding hills, its alien faces, its unknown trials. Nothing would seem to call her thither. Ease, pleasure, even common prudence, as Naomi points out, bid her to return to that land where love and hope are awaiting her. Yet Ruth refused to turn. Something stronger than the tie of homeland restrains her. There is the loneliness of Naomi, the mother of her dead husband, her husband's faith, his God. These she will make her own, and in language unsurpassed for beauty she announced her decision—"Thy people shall be my people, thy God shall be my God."—Ruth the Moabitess found happiness in her choice; life opened out again for her, and she became the ancestress of King David, from whom the Messiah is destined to spring. Among all the women of the Bible she takes the foremost place. She typifies constancy and fidelity to an ideal, patience and hope.

The connection with this Festival is two-fold. Much of the setting of the Book of Ruth is in the harvest field in the early summer—Shevuoth is the Summer Festival, the season of the first fruits. But the essential part of the narrative is the allegiance of Ruth to God and her readiness to follow the course she believed to be right. Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Law and the choice of Israel. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." At the foot of Sinai Israel pledged themselves to accept God's Revelation and to remain faithful to it. Their three months' experience of the

difficulties of wilderness travel might have suggested an immediate return to Egypt; their announcement of their promise to obey and to do, proclaimed their faith. The future was dark and uncertain. We have to make our decisions in life without definite knowledge of their ultimate outcome. Whatever it may be, whether it be duty, or conscience, or a belief in an ideal, or our faith in the justice of God, we must be prepared to go forward and keep on trusting. Israel has lived by constancy and fidelity to an ideal.

A curious point that should be noted is this. Both on Passover and on Pentecost, the one recalling the time of Israel's emancipation, the other commemorating the promulgation of Israel's Law, to impress upon our minds this lesson of constancy and faith in God's dealings with men, the Rabbis have ordained that we should read two books that reveal the fidelity of women. The Song of Songs on Passover tells of the love of a maiden for her lover, and typifies Israel's faithfulness to God. Ruth shows the nature that remains true till death. Does it not show how important is woman in the sphere of religion, and how necessary, for religious experience, are the qualities for which woman is distinguished? the patience, the fidelity, the constancy? The Rabbis tell us that "it was because of the virtue of the Jewish women that Israel were redeemed from Egypt." And in the section of the Law read this day (Exodus 19) the words "tell the house of Jacob" are interpreted to mean אלה הנשים "these are the women." Woman has a genius for religion. When we speak of the strength of Judaism and the influence it exerted in former generations, and when we paint the ideal Jewish home as so many of us knew it, we are merely praising the Jewish

women. And nowadays when religion is fallen from its former high position amongst us Jews, in the work of reconstruction, there is a call for the services of womanhood. They can influence the family and the home for good or for indifference ; let the Jewish women recognize the immense power they possess, let them show forth that constancy and that fidelity to an ideal, of which our history provides so many examples, and we need not fear for the future. Given a home, where the mother is a keen lover of her religion, and you have a Jewish atmosphere. And the reverse is likewise true. To-day, more than ever, we require to learn that lesson of constancy and fidelity. The strengthening of the Jewish position is our greatest problem, and we require to put forward all our strength and all our energies—we can afford to neglect nothing.

Let us explain what exactly we mean. Pentecost reminds us of our choice, it tells us of our selection as a people, and of our work or mission in the world. What is the purpose of the Jew, or what do we mean when we speak of that phrase, the mission of Israel. Does it possesss any meaning for the Jew ? Or is it merely one of those catch phrases, peculiar to the pulpit and the text book ? Looking at things broadly we have survived for centuries and we have overcome persecutions, oppressions, trials and sorrows which would have, and which have, overwhelmed other peoples. This is an oft-repeated truism. but it is a truth. Call it chance, call it fortune, call it coincidence, call it what you will, you cannot ignore the fact. It is also indisputable that Israel have survived because of an ideal or because of a hope. A people scattered all over the world have persisted in living on because they have had an ideal and have remained constant to it. We have no army, we have no

state, we have no country—the indispensable concomitants of nationality in this world—we are merely a people living because we believe we have a right to live. What Jewish history would have been if we had never been exiled or expelled from Palestine, is a matter for conjecture, but in all probability Jewish history would have ended long ago.

As a political nation Israel never succeeded. It was not God's purpose that they should. The Bible is the best witness to this. Yes, we had warriors, we had statesmen, we had the Maccabees, we won Palestine by the sword, but politics were not our metier, and we did not shine as a political entity. After the Maccabean struggle the history of Israel is a sorry record. Internal warfare, internecine strife, quarrels and intrigues, broke up the Jewish State and led to our dispersion. We never possessed the genius or the capacity for internal government, any more than we can be said to possess the genius or the capacity to-day. We are a Kingdom of Priests and a *Holy* Nation. All Jews think they are kings, and we all believe we are priests. One of our besetting sins is the love of strife, and no amount of specious argument will exonerate us from that charge. We quarrel about trifles, our communal meetings, our public conferences, the Zionist congresses, the Zionist parties, are all scenes of discord and dis-union, and even the Zionists, whose ideas are now looming so largely in the public mind, are not and have never been united as to their aims and purposes. The Jew has the gift of leadership, but it is only exhibited when he is dealing with non-Jews. History is our trustiest evidence. There is Jewish history to support the view taken by masses of Jews, that the mission of the Jew lies in our dispersion among

the nations of the world, and in our continued attempt to teach them some of the truths, of which the world stands so sorely in need.

The Zionists will have none of our statement. If you are not one of them they shout you down. Through the air they hurl the epithet "un-Jewish." Now there are Zionists and Zionists. There are those who are keen, genuine and zealous Jews, to whom Judaism is life itself, who live their lives in strict accord with the teachings of their religion. Their interpretation of Jewish history may be at fault, but their sincerity is unquestioned. But there are others, a large section, whose attachment to Judaism is almost threadbare, who live their lives without making any one of the sacrifices which the observance of Judaism entails, who outrage every Jewish law and repudiate every ceremony and who in consequence, are more nearly assimilated to their Gentile surroundings than non-Zionists are ever likely to be. To many of them the "Nationalist hope" is but a Jewish covering. For Judaism itself they care nothing. How dare they presume to speak in the name of the Jewish people? Jewry is not by any means united on the question of "Nationalism." This is a specimen of the logic of our Nationalist friends. A few weeks ago the world was ringing with the glad tidings of the Revolution in Russia. Jews were devoutly thankful that the era of liberation had dawned for our Russian brethren. The Nationalist aspirants almost went beyond themselves in their enthusiasm. They were clamouring at the Board of Deputies because that body had not been impetuous enough to send telegrams to Russia and acclaim the happy event. "The greatest event in Jewish history" they proclaimed. The emancipation of millions of Jews one week,

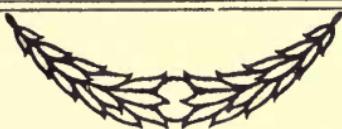
the granting to them all the rights and privileges that belong to man—the preaching of the Jewish Nationalism the next week. Is it consistent? Is it the time now when the nations of the world are beginning to realize the beauties of toleration to come forward and urge the recognition of the Jewish claims to become the possessors of Palestine? Palestine has associations for us, we know, we pray it may one day be a centre from which the light of Jewish teaching may radiate, but that day is not yet. “In that day the Lord shall be one and His name one.” This is the teaching of prophecy, and if you are a believing Jew you cannot brush that aside.

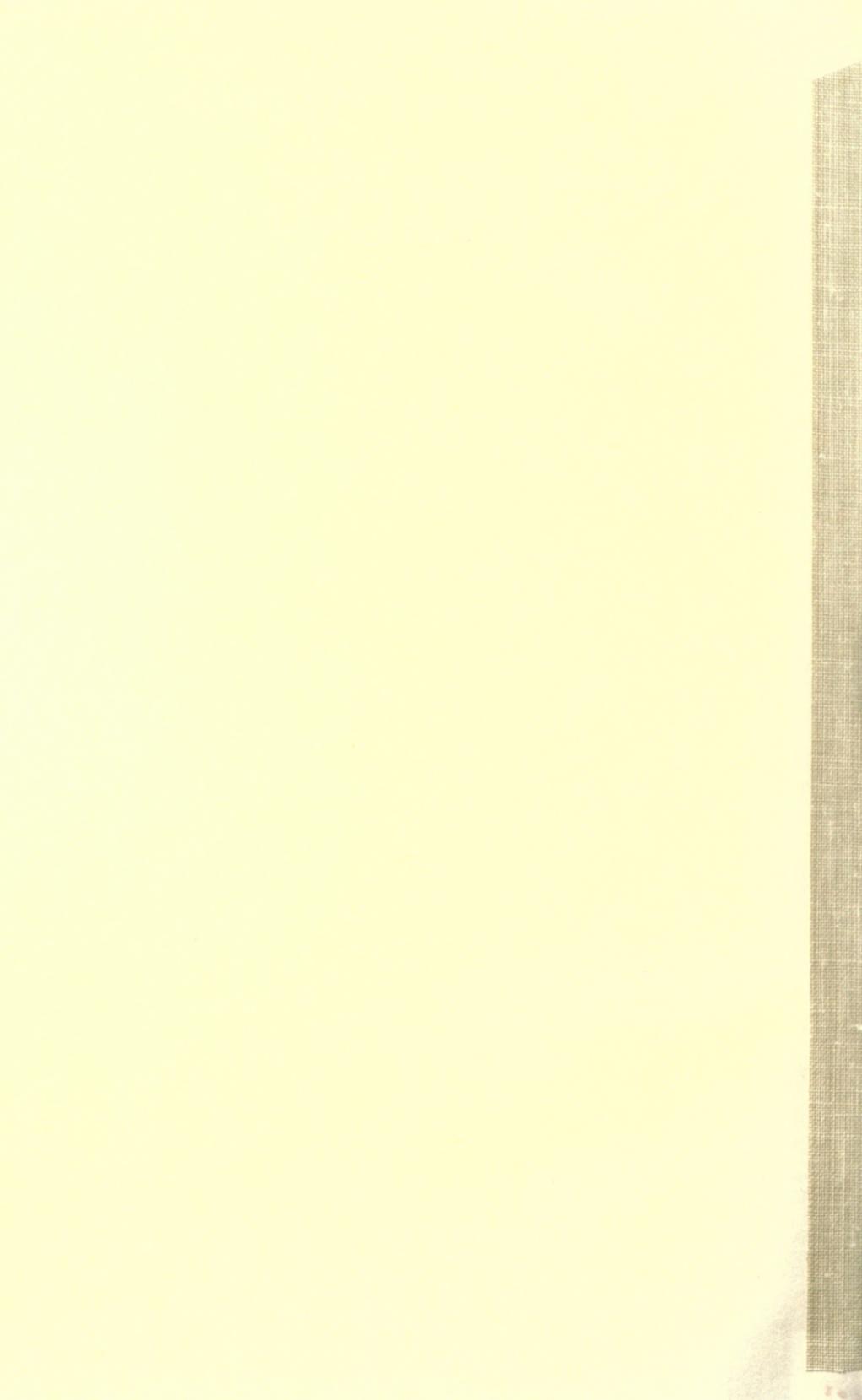
And apart from the moral claim is now the time to urge our rights? Palestine is not yet in the hands of Britain though we hope it will be. Zionism is a question that concerns Jews all the world over. English Jews are but a fraction of the Jews in the world. If the Revolution in Russia endures, who knows what the attitude of the millions of emancipated Russian Jews will be? And what of all the Jews in the Armies of the belligerent nations? It would seem to be an inopportune moment to preach the doctrine of Jewish nationality. Is it fair to the thousands of our young men who are jeopardising their lives and pouring out their blood on the battlefield, to urge what in effect means that Jews, however loyal they are—and of this there is no question—to the countries in which they live, are in reality merely aliens, united to England merely by the accident of birth, but estranged in the sense of nationality. Apart from its unwisdom, it is a false interpretation of Jewish history and of the meaning of the selection of Israel. “Thy people shall be my people, thy God shall be my God”—when the nations of the world

tell this to the Jew, the mission of Israel will be completed. This is not the assimilation of the Jew—it is the recognition on the part of the world that the truths and ideals for which we have survived are justified.

There is one final consideration. The Book of Ruth dates from the time of the Judges—one of stormy periods of Jewish history. It was a time of chaos when there was no recognition of authority. The opening words are “in the days when the judges judged” or according to a sage Rabbinic interpretation שפט השפטים “when they judged the judges.” It will always be a time of trouble when men set themselves up to judge the judges. “Woe to the time when men think themselves wiser than their appointed leaders.” This is what is happening in Anglo-Jewry to-day. Out of that dark period of the judges, the Book of Ruth has been preserved to tell us that constancy and fidelity to an ideal are best exhibited through the medium of the gentler graces of womanhood—the patience and quiet endurance which are the accompaniments of strength. Do we not require the lesson now? The community is, in a sense, responsible for the present state of affairs. We have allowed the Anglo-Jewish press to consist of one paper; we have tolerated the public pillorying week by week in the press, of old trusted leaders who have grown gray in the service of the community and who have a right to be protected. Is this a small thing, or is it a great thing? Does it not require the whole concentrated force of Anglo-Jewry? Make Judaism live, teach it to Jew children, live it yourselves, pledge your word again on this Pentecost day, men, women and children, justify your claim to remain living as Jews. Prove that your interpretation of Jewish history has its justification in

the Jewishness of your lives. God works in His own way and He will accomplish His ends when He thinks fit. It is not our task to hurry God. “*המאמין לא יחיש*” “He that believes will not hasten.” There is a strength born of patience, supported by faith and kept alive by conviction, that Israel has not lived in vain and that the day will come when God will redeem His promise. It is not un-Jewish to believe that that time is not yet. The Messiah will come when the world speaks to the Jew as Ruth did to Naomi “Thy people shall be my people, thy God shall be my God.” The Messiah is to be humble and lowly of spirit, not the demagogue who defies all opposition, but the harbinger of a time of peace and quiet.





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